Nationalism and Racism: Their Relationship and Development

The first breakthrough of nationalism, if not its birth, is often thought to have risen out of the French revolution in the late 18th century. The revolution has been said to mark the "dawn of the modern era" and was crucial in the political transformation of Europe that would ensue in the next two centuries. The ideas of liberalism and self-determinism that emerged out of the revolution spread across Europe. New countries were formed, such as Germany and Italy, from smaller states that possessed a strong "national identity" and others won their independence such as Greece, Poland and Bulgaria.

The spread and pervasiveness of nationalism continued after these post-Enlightenment nationalist revolutions; Benedict Anderson notes in his highly influential Imagined Communities that the contemporary wars between the revolutionary Marxist regimes of Vietnam and Cambodia in 1978, and later China's assault on Vietnam in 1979, present a puzzling shift of Marxist principles. Anderson argues that since World War II "every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms – the People's Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and so forth." As Anderson acknowledges, Eric Hobsbawm is right to state that "Marxist movements and states have tended to become national not only in form but in substance i.e. nationalist. There is nothing to suggest that this trend will not continue." Anderson concludes persuasively that:

2 Anderson, Benedict (1983) Imagined Communities p.2
the 'end of the era of nationalism,' so long prophesised, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.\(^4\)

It is thus evident that nations and nation-states are integrally bound with the development of capitalism and industrialisation; however, as clear as this development and permeation appears, its explanation still remains "a matter of long standing dispute."\(^5\) Theories and interpretations of nationalism have produced a large volume of literature and academic interest in the last half of the 20\(^{th}\) century. In Ernest Gellner's famous book on nationalism, *Nations and Nationalism*, he describes it as:

…primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.

Nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle. Nationalist sentiment is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist movement is one actuated by sentiment of this kind.\(^6\)

In this theory the term nationalism refers to a link between ethnicity and the state and therefore, the term nation-state is a state dominated by that specific ethnicity, whose signs of identity, such as language and religion, are often embedded in its symbolism and legislation.

In Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* he argues for a more anthropological definition of nationalism because as he notes "part of the difficulty is that one tends

\(^4\) Anderson, Benedict (1983) Imagined Communities p.3
\(^5\) Ibid., p.3
\(^6\) Gellner, Nationalism, 1983, p. 1
unconsciously to hypostasize the existence of Nationalism-with-a-big-N…and then to classify 'it' as an ideology."\(^7\) He believes it should be defined along with concepts such as 'kinship' and 'religion' rather than other ideologies. Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."\(^8\) It is *imagined* because the members of "even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members"\(^9\) yet they all share a sense of belonging to an imagined community. It is imagined as *limited* because no matter how large the nation, it is always finite and beyond it lie other nations; as Anderson, writes "no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind." Finally, it is imagined as *sovereign* because as already mentioned nationalism came about in age where Enlightenment and revolution where over-riding the traditional dynastic realm and people were beginning to acknowledge the multitude of religions and thus "the gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state."\(^10\) As opposed to Gellner and others who have focused on the political aspect of nationalism, Anderson strives to explain and understand the force and comradeship which it inspires.

Despite their minor differences both Anderson's and Gellner's interpretations of nationalism, argue that nations are ideological constructions, which seek to establish a link between cultural group and state and "create abstract communities of a different order from those dynastic states or kinship-based communities which pre-dated them."\(^11\)

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\(^7\) Imagined Communities, Anderson, P5  
\(^8\) Ibid., P6  
\(^9\) Ibid., P6  
\(^10\) Ibid., P7  
\(^11\) Ethnicity and Nationalism, Thomas Hyland Eriksen, P99
Racism is a modern ideology which largely originated in the late eighteenth century building upon primitive theories in developing disciplines such as anthropology, anthropometry, craniometry and other areas of research to falsely construct typologies\textsuperscript{12} which served to support the classification of human races. This emergence of scientific racism in the nineteenth effectively allied itself with the justification of European imperialism and went on to have various other ideological applications. With the progression of physical anthropology and after the racial atrocities of World War Two such typologies have generally been denounced; notably, in "The Race Question", a UNESCO statement issued on 18\textsuperscript{th} July 1950, which concluded that "The myth of 'race' has created an enormous amount of human and social damage. In recent years, it has taken a heavy toll in human lives, and caused untold suffering"\textsuperscript{13}. Racism can be defined as the "hierarchical arranging of group relations on the grounds of a dispositive of bodily properties".\textsuperscript{14} As argued by Dietmar Schirmer in \textit{Identity and Intolerance} despite the fact that racism grounds itself in biology and scientific theories "it is not so much a discourse on natural qualities as a discourse on naturalized social relations that deems certain people to be degraded."\textsuperscript{15}

In the same way that a clear definition of the term 'nation' must be established when working towards an understanding of nationalism the same must be done for the term 'race' when attempting to define racism. In his book \textit{Race: The History of an Idea in the West}, Ivan Hannaford supports the view that the concept of race has only come into political being with the progression of society to modernity (although there is

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Typology in anthropology is division of the human species by races.
\item[13] UNESCO, The Race Question, p. 8
\item[14] I and I, p XX
\item[15] Ibid., p XX
\end{footnotes}
some dispute among historians about dating the period termed modernity I am taking it to date from the Age of Enlightenment and thus the late 18th century; a time of great political transformation and the birth of nationalism). In his book Hannaford suggests three main arguments: first, that the word race dates back to around 1200; however, it was only in the seventeenth century that it began to take on a different meaning associated with the Latin word *gens*, meaning clan or family, and was thus related to the idea of an 'ethnic group.' He therefore argues that "the dispositions and presuppositions of race and ethnicity were introduced – some would say 'invented' or 'fabricated' – in modern times."16 Secondly, the main reason why the concept of race became so powerful was because of scientists and historians suggesting that a racial order had always structured mankind. Thirdly, he argues that race has not been a central component in Western civilization but rather that it emerged with the Enlightenment as a way of explaining the complexities of human organisation.

It is widely accepted, as Hannaford argues, that the concept of race and the ideology of racism came about with transgression of society to modernity and leading on from this Alana Lentin argues in her book *Racism: A Beginner's Guide* that "racism is inherently political."17 She argues that:

> racism is political in the sense that it has become inherent in the structures of our political apparatus: the nation-state. Racism emerges and become increasingly important in parallel to and in relation to the development of nation-states in Europe

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In a sense racism needs a political context or background to become relevant and such a context was provided at the correct time with the development of nationalism, another result of modernity. The French philosopher Etienne Balibar stated that there was a relationship of "reciprocal determination" between the two ideologies, meaning they were not the same but instead served to support each other.

In order to fully understand and analyze their relationship it is necessary to explore both the progression of racial theories and the political atmosphere, in which they were received, which ultimately led to racist ideas being integrated into the practices of nation-states. The word 'race' was first used in its current meaning by Francois Bernier in an essay in 1684 in which he posited that the term 'race' referred to observable physical differences in human beings. This essay was made possible in a time when academics began to shift to "more logical description and classifications that ordered humankind in terms of physiological and mental criteria based on observable 'facts' and tested evidence"\(^\text{18}\) as opposed to the somewhat metaphysical theories that presupposed this mode of thought. At the time of Enlightenment, it must be noted that these divisions of race had no ideas of hierarchy about them as of yet. Contrastingly, these early theories of race actually upheld the idea of monogenesis: the belief that all human beings originally descended from one group. This was supported by the Bible's account of Creation and the values of equality and brotherhood that rose out of the French revolution and the Enlightenment. Physical anthropologists at the time, such as Blumenbach, adopting this idea of monogenesis, believed that this original human race was white-skinned and all "non-white races were understood to have 'degenerated' over time due to climate, disease, and way of

\(^{18}\) Hannaford, 1996, P187
life."\(^{19}\) Although, this form of racism was not as aggressive as the ideology it would evolve into after 1870, the suffering and damage it caused in colonies is not to be ignored.

This Enlightenment interpretation of race is wholly different from the current form of racism we are familiar with today. As Hannaford identifies, racism only came into its own when it "developed a will to individual power based on a biology that distinguished superior and inferior races."\(^{20}\) It is clear that this was not what the anthropologists of the Enlightenment were trying to achieve; however, progressions in racial theory led to this idea of monogenesis developing into polygenesis and a form of racism that we are more familiar with today. One significant step in this development was the work of Charles Darwin, which he published in *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. This hugely influential book founded evolutionary theory and introduced the idea of natural selection. Darwin was a Christian and was therefore naturally concerned with his work challenging Christian belief and so did not extend his theory of natural selection to human beings; however, at a time when racial theorists were searching for a more concrete way to form and develop their ideas about race this theory of evolution appeared to be the missing piece of the puzzle. It is not difficult to see how Darwin's ideas on evolution, natural selection and the derived notion of the survival of the fittest allowed a theory of evolving, self-determining races to arise. Racial theorists who were already arguing for the inequality of races now had a way of reinforcing their views in natural history.

\(^{20}\) Hannaford, 1996, P214
Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection was highly influential not just in the progression of race theory but also in the extent to which racism became allied with politics. As Alana Lentin argues:

his work represents the final stage in the naturalization of society and politics: the final break with the classical tradition that saw shared interests leading to individual thought and action as the main determinants of politics.\(^\text{21}\)

Essentially political and social life now had some credible and pseudo-scientific explanation behind them and could almost be seen as an extension of natural processes; Hannaford concludes that after Darwin "the condition of human society depended for explanation more on the principles of natural selection and evolution than upon the quality of political institutions"\(^\text{22}\). Another significance was the attitude adopted by Social Darwinists; due to their belief that the stronger species would survive over the weaker species, they concluded that in order to ensure the progression and maintenance of the human race that the inferior or weaker races must be vanquished.

Social theorists such as Ernst Haeckel began to push these theories to their limits and propose extreme ideas. Haeckel believed that the loss of human lives could be justifiable in the interest of preserving the race. In real terms, this meant the killing or 'extermination' of the sick or disabled. These extremist ideas grew in popularity throughout the latter half of the 19\(^{th}\) century especially after Francis Galton coined the term 'eugenics'. The idea of Eugenics involved the systematic control of breeding

\(^{22}\) Hannaford, 1996, P273
within a race to either hinder it or strengthen it. This idea did not enter the political realm until Nazism in Germany, but it did begin to enter the common consciousness of the public. Eugenics provoked serious thought considering the possibilities of human engineering, leading to the manifestation of concepts, such as the necessary control of breeding with so-called inferior races and racist terms such as 'half-caste', within Acts such as the Metal Deficiency Act in the UK in 1913, championed by the prominent politician Winston Churchill himself. This Act was passed in reaction to the idea of sterilisation in these undesirable races, and though this sterilisation never took place, it illustrates the extent to which racism became infused with politics in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Racism today is seen as one of society's greatest afflictions and something which States strive to combat; it is often described as "an illness, a cancer maybe that has infected society from within."\(^{23}\) However, as outlined earlier it appears that racism grounded its roots firmly in the development of the nation-state and resultantly, as Bauman suggests in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, appears to be "politically inseparable from the project of modernity due to the imbedded process of categorisation undertaken in the Enlightenment."\(^{24}\) This idea that race was one of the main ideas structuring a theory of state and similarly that the State plays a role racialisation was first proposed by the German philosopher Eric Voegelin in two volumes which he published in 1933\(^{25}\). Having fled Nazi Germany he set out to understand how a nation-state was formed and controversially concluded that racialisation was central to the formation of such a state. Voegelin recognised that the racist ideas which had been incorporated into Nazi policy and the development of

\(^{23}\) Racisms An Introduction, P53
\(^{24}\) Racisms An Introduction, P53
\(^{25}\) Voegelin, 1933 [2000], 1940
other nation-states were based on false pseudo-scientific claims. These false notions of 'race' provided "ideal fuel"\(^{26}\) for nations which, as Voegelin argues, were attempting to promote themselves as separate constructions. Lentin refers to this as "the theoretical glue"\(^{27}\) which binds the people to the abstract State. Voegelin, thus, highlights the point that such racial science would be of no importance had it not found support in the political climate.

As the theories of racial scientists became evermore infused with politics, the ideas of race and nation came to be used synonymously in politics. The first link between race and state was made by Ludwig Gumplowicz in his book *Rasse und Staat* in 1875. He reduced the nation-state to nothing more than people who lived in it and thus moved away from the traditional Enlightenment mode of thought which valued the individual. This meant that the individual was "completely subsumed under the state"\(^{28}\) and resultantly, "the only option is race war because it is only through competition with other races (nations) that the state can act."\(^{29}\)

The ideas of "race" and "nation" are two closely linked constructions and as noted in *Identity and Intolerance*, when they are brought together it is often in a "pejorative manner that tends to eliminate the differences between them and likens one with the other based on their exclusionary character."\(^{30}\) Tom Nairn appears to support this statement as he concludes that racism and anti-Semitism are just derivatives of nationalism in his book *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*.

\(^{26}\) Racisms An Introduction, P53
\(^{27}\) Lentin and Lentin, 2006 P3-4
\(^{28}\) Racism, Alana Lentin P17
\(^{29}\) Racism, Alana Lentin P17
\(^{30}\) Ibid., p XXI
Benedict Anderson contends Nairn's view in his book *Imagined Communities* where he notes that:

> in an age when it is so common for progressive cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?) to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love and often profoundly self-sacrificing love.\(^{31}\)

In Anderson's proposed theory of nationalism, as the title of the book suggests, his belief is that a nation is a community socially constructed, in other words it is imagined by the people who perceive themselves to be part of that nation. The people of even the smallest nations will certainly never meet or know everyone in their nation yet there is a strong imagined sense of community. Anderson's theory suggests a strong sense of fraternity and comradeship within the nation and "ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.\(^{32}\) Anderson references the cultural products of nationalism, such as the huge amount of art it has inspired, as evidence of the love and passion which this ideology produces. Furthermore, he points out how rare it is to find "nationalist products expressing fear and loathing\(^{33}\). Essentially, Anderson argues that racism is almost the complete opposite of nationalism as nationalist aggression and conflict happens across national borders whereas racism is a tool of domestic oppression. Even the most extreme forms of nationalist hatred, acknowledge and even reinforce the nationality of the Other; however, racism denies the Other its very identity.

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\(^{31}\) Imagined Communities, Anderson, P141
\(^{32}\) Ibid., p7
\(^{33}\) Ibid., P 142
Anderson is eager to argue for the positive utopian nature of nationalism and in a recent interview he said: "I must be the only one writing about nationalism who doesn't think it ugly. If you think about researchers such as Gellner and Hobsbawm, they have quite a hostile attitude to nationalism. I actually think that nationalism can be an attractive ideology. I like its Utopian elements." He is correct to identify this hostility in two main scholars of nationalism which reflects a widely held public attitude towards this ideology: that it is an affliction of modern society. This explicitly strengthens nationalism's ties with racism, which undoubtedly remains an affliction of modern society. This assumed hostility towards nationalism, as Umut Ozkirimili writes in his introduction to *Theories of Nationalism*, underlines a "tendency to reduce nationalism to its extreme manifestations that is to separatist movements that threaten the stability of existing states or to aggressive right-wing politics."34 These 'extreme manifestations' to which Ozkirimli refers are not hard to pinpoint whether in recent history or in current society; the Nazi Party in World War Two Germany, who even used the term 'nationalist' in their title and enforced racism along with the brutal persecution of countless other minorities, and the British Nationalist Party (BNP), who until a recent change of stance by current leader Nick Griffin, admitted they were "100 per cent racist."35

Despite Anderson's utopian and almost idealistic view of nationalism its exclusionary manner must not be ignored; as Thomas Hylland Eriksen notes "national identities are constituted in relation to *others*; the very idea of the nation presupposes that there are

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34 *Theories of Nationalism: A critical introduction* P4
other nations, or at least other peoples, who are not members of the nation.”

Presented in this light, this appears to be one fundamental similarity between the two ideologies and is probably their most unifying attribute.

Although it must be noted, as George Mosse identifies in his essay *Nationalism and Racism*, ‘racism is a totality'; it is an ideology solely focused on racial supremacy and the exclusion and thus the persecution of ‘inferior’ races whereas nationalism merely suggests such ideas of exclusion. This returns to Anderson's account of the passion and fraternity generated in nationalism over hate, which he argues is very rare. This form of love generated in nationalism, which leads people to die for their country, can never be generated in a comparable way in the ideology of racism. Contrastingly, instead of producing a love for one's race, it serves better to produces a resentment and hatred of other races. Racism relies on exclusion and persecution almost entirely whereas nationalism does not.

In attempting to fully evaluate the intimate relationship which the two ideologies of nationalism and racism have with each other it becomes apparent that premature ideas of race are embedded deeply within the development of the nation-state; however, this early development of nationalism cannot define the entirety of the ideology. Instead, the utopian nature of nationalism and the passion it inspires must be remembered. This force is so powerful that it leads people to die for their country and there is certainly no parallel to this in racism, or indeed other ideologies. Although admittedly the origins of nationalism are heavily tainted with racism's parallel development this

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36 Thomas Hyland Eriksen, *Nationalism and Ethnicity*
37 George L. Mosse, *Racism and Nationalism*
does not mean that nationalism, the epitome of modernity, should be condemned in the same way that racism has been in recent society.
Bibliography


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